

COLLECTIVE ACTION CASE STUDY

Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement

Ending poverty in all of its forms

Year founded	2002	Groups assembled	180 local collaboratives working across 500 municipalities
Regions represented	Primary focus is Canada with relationships in the US, the United Kingdom, Europe, New Zealand and Australia	Organizations involved	37,000 changemakers from thousands of organizations across the world (with a majority in Canada)
Entity type	Non-profit organization	Constituents represented	Local collaboratives are working in communities representing approximately 60% of people living in Canada (24 million of 40 million citizens).

Background

Tamarack began in the 1990s as a series of conversations between two non-profit leaders – Paul Born and Alan Broadbent – reflecting on how to bring together multiple stakeholders across a city to combat poverty. In 2002, this idea spread nationally as community leaders from cities across Canada came together to launch a campaign called Vibrant Communities. From this gathering, 13 cities committed to embarking on a 10-year journey to explore a collaborative, cross-sector approach to poverty reduction.

To support the novel social change approach, Tamarack created Vibrant Communities (now Networks for Change) to support the network of place-based collaboratives, and a Learning Centre (now Skills for Change) to document the effort and disseminate learnings to the broader community. In 2012, the results from Vibrant Communities showed that the effort had exceeded their goals: more than 250,000 people experienced benefits and 15% reported a durable reduction in poverty levels. Based on this evidence, the network began to grow rapidly and, starting in 2015, a series of annual Poverty Summits raised the profile of poverty reduction in Canada.

Over the next decade, Tamarack applied its proven approach to three additional issue areas: belonging, climate transitions and youth futures, while continuing to build the network to end poverty. Each of these issue areas has grown into a network of local collaboratives bringing together different sectors and individuals impacted by their areas of work to implement large-scale change initiatives in their cities. A total of 37,000 changemakers around the world use Tamarack's resources, consulting and coaching services to build the skills to collaborate on community-driven outcomes.

Headquartered:
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada



Number of employees
42
full time

Budget range
\$8-12
million (Canadian dollars)

Collective architecture

Action level



Tamarack supports 180 local collaboratives that bring together multi-sectoral partners and lived experience experts to develop and lead place-based, multi-strategy community plans. Additionally, **changemakers** from across the world build capacity in five interconnected practice areas to contribute to community- and systems-level impact.

Network level



Local collaboratives are supported through four issue-based **Networks for Change** in Canada and the US: Communities Ending Poverty, Communities Building Belonging, Communities Building Youth Futures and Community Climate Transitions.

Supporting level



Tamarack has a **team of employees** who explore, organize, sense-make and codify, and amplify and advocate in support of the local collaboratives and networks for change.



The collective pathway



Vision: Tamarack is dedicated to ending poverty in all its forms. Tamarack supports individuals and communities to change systems to end poverty, create sustainable and equitable climate transitions, inspire a sense of belonging and community, and improve opportunities with and for youth.



Method: Tamarack supports four Networks for Change which unite local collaboratives working towards equitable outcomes at a whole-community scale. Local collaboratives draw upon Tamarack's expertise in five key skills areas to drive change collectively: 1) collaborative governance, 2) community engagement, 3) shared leadership, 4) community innovation and 5) participatory learning and evaluation. With Tamarack's coaching, tools and consultation, changemakers and collaboratives develop their own localized, unique approaches. Tamarack finds that local collaboratives generally move through four development stages: 1) building readiness, 2) mobilizing for community-wide action, 3) implementing and adapting, and 4) sustaining and renewing.




Principles: Communities and changemakers connected to Tamarack are guided by seven key principles. Collaboratives work to: 1) be accountable to a shared,

measurable, population-level impact and equity gap in a defined geography; 2) work towards a shared outcome target within a specific time frame; 3) include diverse perspectives; 4) align a diversity of human, financial and other contributions towards the shared outcome; 5) centre those with lived experience of the outcome; 6) build understanding of the histories behind and root causes of prioritized equity gaps; and 7) start with community leadership and other community assets.¹⁵



Practices: Tamarack encourages a set of practices in each of the five areas previously listed, such as creating and holding accountability to partnership agreements, mapping the landscape, naming a community-defined goal, creating a measurement framework, developing a collaborative governance structure that supports the framework, publishing a community plan and reporting back on it to the broad community. However, each community is unique, and Tamarack's model is to share evidence and patterns rather than be prescriptive. At the same time, Tamarack connects and convenes communities regularly as a network to share learning, commiserate and support one another, amplify each other's work and organize towards levers of change that are national or regional in nature.

15. Adapted from Martínez, N. C. (2024). *Middle Grade Math: Spotlight on Texas Cradle to Career Network Members*. StriveTogether. <https://www.strivetgether.org/middle-grade-math-spotlight-on-texas-cradle-to-career-network-members/>.

Capability	Activities
Building movements 	<p>Creating a shared narrative: Tamarack is creating a shared conversation in Canada about ending poverty in all its forms and the importance of community belonging.</p> <p>Expanding the stakeholder base: Local collaboratives commit to bringing together a diverse stakeholder base, including the public sector, when building their initiatives.</p> <p>Centring lived experience: Tamarack's approaches are underpinned by a deep commitment to including those with lived experience. Local collaboratives commit to including partners with lived experience in their initiatives.</p> <p>Organizing field-level convenings: Tamarack hosts an annual gathering and biweekly webinars to inspire commitment to change at scale. Regional field-level convenings focus on public policy priorities. Tamarack frequently engages key partners and governments to understand issues, track trends, surface priorities and identify the implications for the field.</p> <p>Celebrating key milestones: Tamarack celebrates the completion of community plans, as well as key milestones and impacts. Tamarack is in the process of determining how to credential competencies within the five practice areas for individuals.</p> <p>Engaging media and journalists: Tamarack engages the media as a tactic in all aspects of their work, especially in their amplifying and advocating work. Tamarack's approaches and evidence base have been featured in the New York Times, the National Observer and Future of Good, among others.</p>
Hosting learning communities and building capacity 	<p>Codifying a methodology: Tamarack's Community Pathways Journey Map depicts how communities develop core competencies across the five skill areas and through the four phases of development. The Journey Map enables Tamarack to connect communities with coaches, resources, tools and peer learning cohorts appropriate to their stage of development and learning needs.</p> <p>Capturing and disseminating learnings: Tamarack draws on its work with changemakers and collaboratives to advance evidence-based methodologies and strategies in each of the five skills areas. Tamarack curates an online library to disseminate case studies, tools, guides, and articles to members and non-members.</p> <p>Hosting communities of practice: Tamarack hosts communities of practice to share learnings and evidence and organize across people and places. Tamarack also hosts workshops as places to develop skills and community.</p> <p>Consulting, coaching and training: Tamarack offers coaching and one-on-one support to network members. Tamarack also hosts numerous online courses, webinars, and on-site training to local collaboratives.</p>
Strengthening data systems 	<p>Creating shared definitions: Tamarack and the network communities are building shared language and understanding around their roles as field catalysts and the systems changes to which they contribute.</p> <p>Developing shared metrics: As part of its strategic planning, the team identifies priorities, as well as activities and metrics to drive these priorities forward. Tamarack's overall goal is to contribute to Canada's poverty rate being 5% or less, which equates to 2 million additional people exiting conditions of poverty.</p> <p>Collecting, analysing and sharing data: Tamarack conducts annual network member check-ins using written surveys and phone calls. Staff and members then analyse the data, sense-make and pattern, identify learning for continuous improvement, and recognize opportunities for action. Tamarack reports on progress and impact through an annual report, local reports and external evaluation reports.</p>

Collective action activities (continued)

Capability	Activities
Influencing institutions 	<p>Developing policy recommendations: Tamarack has a public policy advisory group made up of network members, which sets policy priorities and actions. Tamarack is currently advocating for policies on community belonging, basic income and financial security, a Northern Territorial Youth and Community Strategy, and for governments to better partner with place-based collaboratives.</p> <p>Augmenting government staffing: Approximately half of the convening organizations in Tamarack's local collaboratives are local governments. Tamarack supports federal, provincial and local government departments directly by facilitating planning, evaluation and community engagement processes, and providing capability-building support to government grantees.</p>
Investing in systemic solutions 	<p>Sub-granting to collectives: Tamarack invests in local collaboratives for specific projects and initiatives. Since 2020, Tamarack has invested CAD \$27 million in communities for operational support and for nearly 350 community innovation projects.</p> <p>Developing financing solutions: Tamarack is exploring the role they might play in bringing social finance and impact investing products to communities. Tamarack is looking at the feasibility of using outcome-based financing to fund milestones on the community journey map and building readiness in collaboratives to absorb financing.</p>



Case vignette: The Roving Campus



Launched in 2020, the Roving Campus is an education innovation created by three local teachers in the Canadian province of Manitoba.

With support from local collaborative Portage La Prairie Community Building Youth Futures, the Roving Campus provides an alternative high school environment for young people who are not succeeding in the traditional school environment. The school runs over five days: three days are dedicated to essential outcomes and certifications, and two days are reserved for planning, coaching and one-on-one instruction. Free transport, meals, gym clothes and assistance

with obtaining identity documents are also provided through the programme. Students spend about one-third of their time out of the classroom, doing hands-on learning and field trips. The programme also includes vocational certifications and resume skills. Although the first year was challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme has proven its resilience and effectiveness, with an average attendance increase of 40% over traditional school. The alternative school has also showcased the power of partnerships, with numerous community partners throughout Manitoba contributing to the programme. In recent years, the Roving Campus has transitioned into a programme of the school division to ensure its sustainability.¹⁶

16. Adapted from case study: Cheuy, S., Koran, S., Woods, A. (2021). *Portage La Prairie: Roving Campus Re-Engages Students*.

Supporting infrastructure

Governance and participation

Tamarack is governed by a 12-member board of directors that strives to be representative of the communities it serves. On a strategic level, Tamarack aims to be member-driven when developing its offerings and when setting and advancing public policy priorities. Their 2030 plan and more recent Equity and Indigenization Framework and Action Plan were shaped over 18-month periods by hundreds of surveys, focus groups and interviews with network, team and board members. Annually, Tamarack's member survey shapes its operating plan.

Team culture and competencies

Tamarack maintains a Skills for Change team and a Networks for Change team. The Skills for Change team are practitioners in the five key skills areas for community change (described above), while the Networks for Change team builds deep relationships with community collaboratives to understand their context and connect them to people and resources that will accelerate their progress towards equitable outcomes.

Values: Tamarack's current strategy articulates values of connection, place, strength and optimism, equity and justice, courage and learning, and action and impact which guides all aspects of the team's work.

Competencies: Tamarack's team competencies include:

1) exploring (engaging key partners to understand issues and identify the implications for place-based work); 2) organizing (prototyping models, facilitating funding and amplifying knowledge); 3) sense-making and codifying (codifying place-based approaches and disseminating options and rationales for collective action); and 4) amplifying and advocating (making local work visible and advocating for systems and policy change). Individual competencies include maintaining a systems-level perspective, navigating complexity, centring relationships and connections, holding hope, strength and optimism, and practicing awareness of self as an agent of change.

Collaborative and adaptive learning: Continuous learning and adaptation is directly linked to Tamarack's strategic plan and priorities. Tamarack scans and engages with many fields of practice for new and innovative solutions to solve complex problems. Drawing from the fields of practice and place-based network, Tamarack contributes new tools and resources that are designed to advance the work of changemakers.

Enabling technology

Since the first 13 Trail Builder communities, Tamarack has relied on technology platforms to share learnings, support partnerships and enable access to peers across Canada. Today, Tamarack uses its website as an online learning platform as well as online meeting tools to provide virtual coaching access, webinars, workshops, publications (tools, guides, case studies), and regular communities of practice calls.



1 MILLION

households

have risen out of poverty since 2001
aided by Tamarack

350

municipalities

have been engaged by Tamarack
in 83 regions of Canada

Networks for change impact



The Communities Ending Poverty (CEP) network

Currently has over 80 member community collaboratives working across more than 400 municipalities in Canada.



The Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYP) network

Has worked across 20 small, medium, Indigenous, rural and remote communities, and engaged more than 63,000 youth, 6,000 local leaders, 1,784 government representatives and 2,379 youth-serving organizations since 2020.



The Communities Building Belonging (CBB) network

Is currently supporting 45 collaboratives working across Canada to make community essential and increase the sense of belonging for individuals.



The Community Climate Transitions (CCT) network

Has been recognized by the Government of Canada in its Voluntary National Review¹⁷ for localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Canada. They are currently supporting 43 local collaboratives to move forward actions for climate mitigation and adaptation that centre equity.

Policy impact



Living wages

Tamarack worked alongside the CEP network to facilitate a national dialogue about living wages in Canada, leading to the development of standalone Living Wage network. They shared the learnings from several local living wage prototypes and collaborated to create a national methodology for calculating living wages. This work has contributed to policy wins such as relief benefits during COVID-19 and increases to minimum wages across Canada based on living wage information and campaigns.



Community belonging

Tamarack is currently advocating for a national plan to integrate community belonging into discussions about national economics and quality of life. Tamarack is working with communities to establish a blueprint for this strategy as well as advocating to governments for how this effort could address

the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation that is impacting individuals, communities and society at large.



Poverty reduction strategy

Tamarack partnered with the Government of Canada and its Networks for Change to convene 33 Community Conversations to inform Canada's first poverty reduction strategy.¹⁸ Canada's poverty reduction strategy created an official poverty line for the country, created a National Advisory Council on Poverty, developed a measurement and tracking system for the plan, and set important targets for poverty reduction (reduce poverty by 50% by 2030, as an example). Tamarack continues to work with the government and communities to localize the poverty reductions strategy and to translate knowledge between communities and the federal government.

17. Government of Canada. (2023). *2023 Voluntary National Review Spotlight: Partners and stakeholders actions to localize the SDGs*.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/agenda-2030/voluntary-national-review/2023-report/annex-a.html>.

18. Government of Canada. (2022). *Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy – What we heard about poverty so far*.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/reports/what-we-heard.html>.

CASE STORY

Living SJ local collaborative



St John has a population of nearly 75,000 people and is known for its beautiful architecture, stunning landscapes and maritime heritage. The city serves as a vital economic centre for New Brunswick, a province on Canada's Atlantic coast. However, despite its beauty and heritage, in the late 1990s, the city was experiencing higher-than-average rates of poverty.

In 1999, 100 local business leaders assembled to tackle the roots of poverty in their community. They began with a data collection exercise to understand the root causes of poverty and realized that "lifetime" poverty – as opposed to situational or short-term poverty – required concentrated attention. This led them to focus on supporting the most vulnerable families by strengthening their health, education and employment pathways.

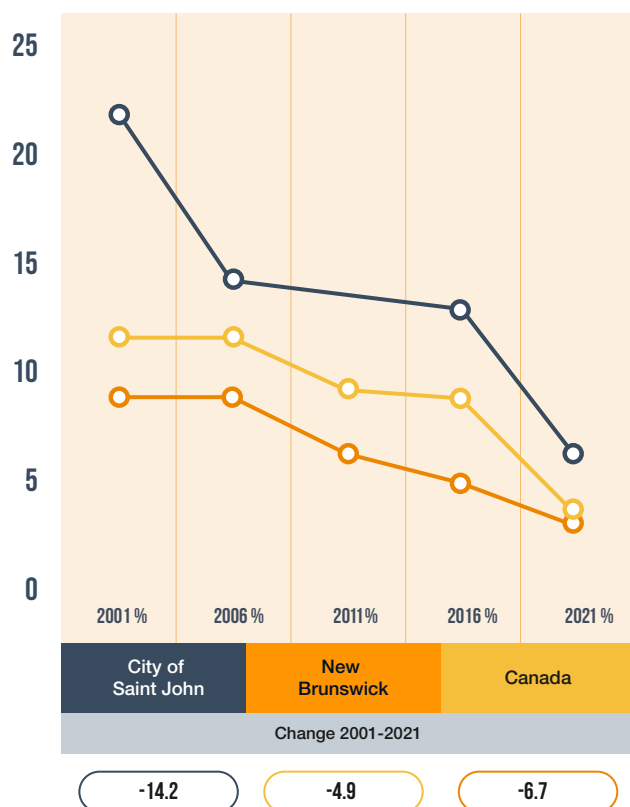
The collaborative joined Tamarack's Vibrant Communities Network in 2003, led by four founding organizations,

each representing a different stakeholder group (civil society, people with lived experience, business and government). Over a 10-year period, this group developed a poverty reduction strategy, conducted research to understand the roots of poverty in the community, and strengthened the infrastructure of the five neighbourhoods with the greatest needs. Based on a decade of growing together, this collaborative grew further and evolved into a new entity called Living SJ.

Today, these efforts have borne fruit: high school graduation rates have increased from 50% to 70% in the focus neighbourhoods and the number of social assistance cases decreased by 17% over the 2010-2017 study period. Overall, the poverty rate in the city has reduced at a more significant rate than poverty reductions provincially and nationally. In 2020, Living SJ concluded its activities and transitioned to a regional initiative led by the New Brunswick province.

The poverty rate in the city of Saint John has dropped over the twenty-year period

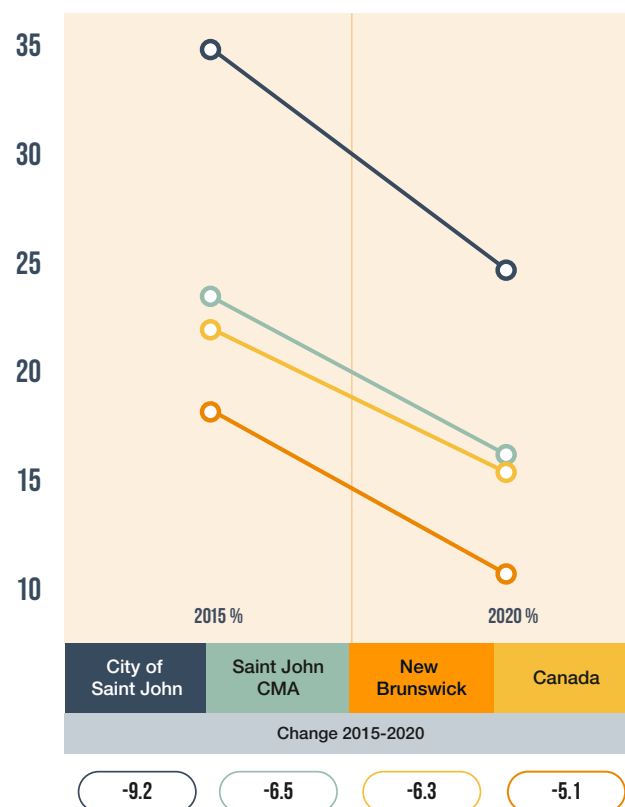
% of population living below the poverty line



Source: Statistics Canada Census Measure: **Low Income Cut-Off, After Tax (LICO-AT)**. The statistics were compiled by BICAPI with help from local partners, Human Development Council and Community Foundation.

The poverty rate among children has declined between 2015 and 2020

% of children (0 to 17 years of age) living below the poverty line



Source: Statistics Canada Census Measure – **Low Income Measure-After Tax (LIM-AT)**